

# MOTION UNDER CENTRAL FORCES

A central force is directed towards or away from a point, which is called center of force. It can be written explicitly as:

$$\vec{F} = F(r) \hat{r}. \quad (1)$$

In the following, we study motion under central forces.

## I. PLANE OF MOTION IN A CENTRAL FORCE

- Angular momentum:  $\vec{L} = \vec{r} \times \vec{p}$
- We now consider the change in the angular momentum:

$$\frac{d\vec{L}}{dt} = \vec{r} \times \frac{d\vec{p}}{dt} + \frac{d\vec{r}}{dt} \times \vec{p} = \vec{r} \times \vec{F} = 0 \quad (2)$$

- Consider the position vector  $\vec{r}_0 = \vec{r}(t_0)$  is in a plane  $P$  at time  $(t_0)$ . How do we know that the position vector  $\vec{r}(t)$  is always in the plane  $P$ ?
  - The plane  $P$  is orthogonal to the unit vector  $\vec{n}_0 = \vec{r}_0 \times \vec{v}_0$
  - We know that  $\vec{L} = \vec{r} \times \vec{p} = m\vec{r} \times \vec{v}$  does not change with time
  - Thus the particle remains in the plane  $P$ .
- The angular momentum  $\vec{L}$  is a constant of the motion in a central force problem.

## II. EFFECTIVE POTENTIAL IN THE CENTRAL FORCE PROBLEM

- Since motion in a central-force motion is confined to a plane, we consider the plane corresponding to  $\theta = \frac{\pi}{2}$  in the spherical polar coordinates. This is the  $xy$ -plane.
- The line element:  $d\vec{r} = dr \hat{r} + r d\theta \hat{\theta} + r \sin \theta d\phi \hat{\phi} = dr \hat{r} + r d\phi \hat{\phi}$ .
- Thus, velocity:  $\vec{v} = \dot{r} \hat{r} + r \dot{\phi} \hat{\phi}$
- and the kinetic energy is :  $T = \frac{1}{2}m (\vec{v} \cdot \vec{v}) = \frac{1}{2}m\dot{r}^2 + \frac{1}{2}mr^2\dot{\phi}^2$
- So the coordinates are like the plane polar coordinates  $(r, \phi)$ , such that:  $r = \sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$ .
- The magnitude of angular momentum  $L = m|\vec{r} \times \vec{v}| = mr^2\dot{\phi}$  is a constant.
- The energy can be written as:  $E = \frac{1}{2}m (\dot{r}^2 + r^2\omega^2) + V(r) = \frac{1}{2}m\dot{r}^2 + \frac{1}{2}mr^2\omega^2 + V(r)$ . Here  $\omega = \dot{\phi}$
- Thus, the total energy is:

$$E = \frac{1}{2}m\dot{r}^2 + V_{\text{eff}}(r). \quad (3)$$

Here, the effective potential  $V_{\text{eff}}$  is given as:

$$V_{\text{eff}}(r) = \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + V(r) \quad (4)$$

### III. LAGRANGIAN FOR THE CENTRAL FORCE PROBLEM

Following the results of section II, the Lagrangian is

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2}m\dot{r}^2 + \left( \frac{mr^2\dot{\phi}^2}{2} - V(r) \right) \quad (5)$$

Now use EL equations:

$$m\ddot{r} = mr\dot{\phi}^2 - V'(r) = -\frac{d(V_{\text{eff}})}{dr}, \quad (6)$$

Note that  $\phi$  is a cyclic coordinate. Thus,

$$\frac{d}{dt}(mr^2\dot{\phi}) = 0 \implies L = mr^2\dot{\phi} = \text{constant of motion.} \quad (7)$$

We can then rewrite the radial acceleration as:

$$m\frac{d^2r}{dt^2} = \frac{L^2}{mr^3} + F(r), \quad F(r) = -V'(r). \quad (8)$$

We now use the above results to obtain the equation of the orbit.

### IV. THE ORBIT EQUATION

We first write the radial acceleration in the following form:

$$m^2\frac{d^2r}{dt^2} = \frac{L^2}{r^3} + mF(r) \quad (9)$$

We now consider a new variable:

$$w = \frac{1}{r}, \quad dw = -\frac{1}{r^2}dr \quad (10)$$

The radial velocity is then:

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = \frac{dr}{d\phi}\dot{\phi} = \frac{dr}{d\phi}\frac{L}{mr^2} \quad (11)$$

Thus, we have

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = \frac{dr}{d\phi}\dot{\phi} = -\frac{dw}{d\phi}\frac{L}{m} \quad (12)$$

Finally, for radial accelerations, we have:

$$\frac{d^2r}{dt^2} = \frac{d}{d\phi}\left[\frac{dr}{dt}\right]\dot{\phi} = -\frac{d^2w}{d\phi^2}\frac{L\dot{\phi}}{m} \quad (13)$$

Using Eq.9 in the above equations, we have

$$-\frac{d^2w}{d\phi^2}\frac{L\dot{\phi}}{m} = \frac{L^2}{r^3} + mF(r) \quad (14)$$

The above becomes:

$$\frac{d^2w}{d\phi^2}L^2w^2 = -L^2w^3 - mF\left(\frac{1}{w}\right) \quad (15)$$

Finally, we obtain the **orbit equation**:

$$\frac{d^2w}{d\phi^2} + w = -\frac{m}{L^2w^2}F\left(\frac{1}{w}\right). \quad (16)$$

## V. THE KEPLER PROBLEM

The study of planetary orbits (such as that of the earth) about a star (such as the sun) is called the Kepler problem. It is special kind of central force defined in Eq.(1). In this case:

$$V = -\frac{k}{r}, \quad F = -\frac{k}{r^2}, \quad (17)$$

Note that  $k = GM_{\odot}m$  is constant in the Kepler problem.

### A. Effective potential in the Kepler problem

Here, the effective potential  $V_{\text{eff}}$  is given as:

$$V_{\text{eff}}(r) = \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + V(r), \quad V(r) = -\frac{k}{r}. \quad (18)$$

A plot of the effective potential  $V_{\text{eff}}$  is given in Fig.(1), while a phase portrait is given in Fig.(2). It should be noted that we are solving this problem as an effective one-body problem in a central force. Indeed, this is a two-body problem, which reduces to a one-body problem as shown in appendix C.

A typical length scale in the system is given by the minima of the  $V_{\text{eff}}$ . It is:

$$r_0 = \frac{L^2}{mk}. \quad (19)$$

A typical energy scale is:

$$E_0 = -\frac{k}{r_0}. \quad (20)$$

In what follows, we derive the orbits explicitly.

### B. Orbit equation for the Kepler problem

Using Eq.(16), the orbit equation for the Kepler problem is:

$$\frac{d^2w}{d\phi^2} + w = \frac{mk}{L^2} = \frac{1}{r_0} \quad (21)$$

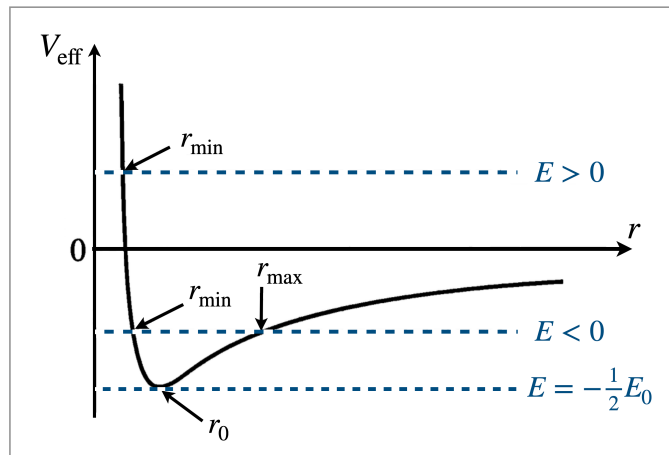


Figure 1. The effective potential in the central force problem where  $F(r) = -k/r^2$ .

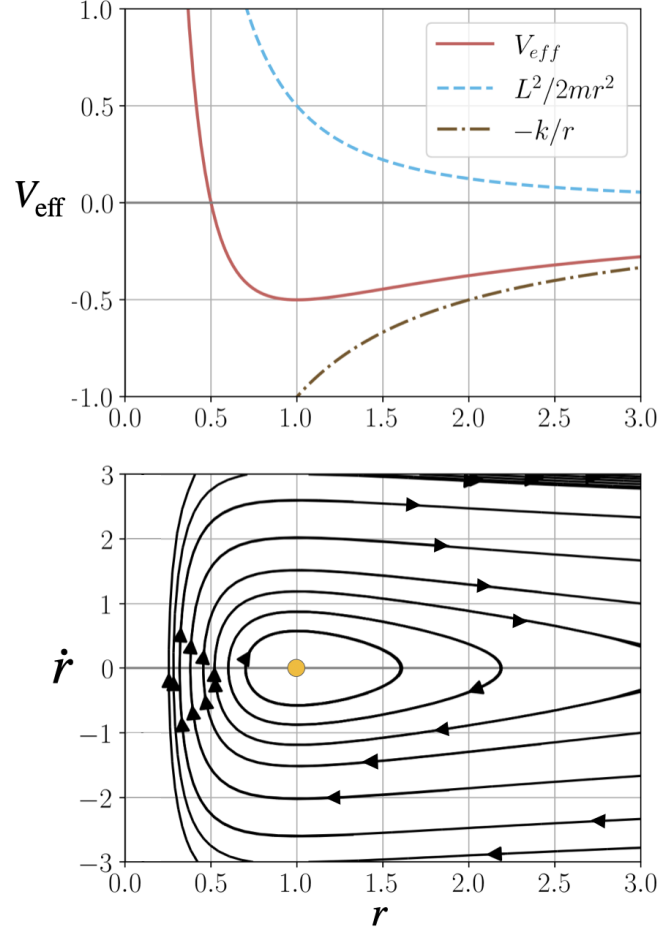


Figure 2. **Effective potential and the phase portrait in the central force problem where  $F(r) = -k/r^2$ .** Here we have chosen  $r_0 = 1$  and  $E_0 = 1$  in appropriate units.

It is a shifted harmonic oscillator. The solution is:

$$w = A \cos(\phi - \phi_0) + \frac{1}{r_0} \quad (22)$$

We now choose  $\phi = 0$  when the orbit is closest to the origin (the periapsis). Thus  $\phi_0 = 0$ . Finally, we have:

$$w = \frac{1}{r} = \frac{1}{r_0} (1 + \epsilon \cos \phi) \quad (23)$$

Here we have chosen:  $A = \epsilon/r_0$ . We now need to find the constant  $\epsilon$ .

Following the results of section II,

$$\frac{dr}{dt} = \pm \sqrt{\frac{2}{m} \left( E - \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + \frac{k}{r} \right)}, \quad r^2 \frac{d\phi}{dt} = \frac{L}{m} \quad (24)$$

Thus, we have

$$\frac{1}{r^2} \frac{dr}{d\phi} = \pm \sqrt{\frac{2mE}{L^2} - \frac{1}{r^2} + \frac{2mk}{rL^2}} \quad (25)$$

Making a change of variable  $w = \frac{1}{r}$ , we get:

$$\frac{dw}{d\phi} = \mp \sqrt{\frac{2E}{r_0 k} - w^2 + \frac{2w}{r_0}} \quad (26)$$

Rearranging the terms, we have

$$\left[\frac{dw}{d\phi}\right]^2 = \frac{2E}{kr_0} - w^2 + \frac{2w}{r_0} \quad (27)$$

Finally,

$$\left[\frac{dw}{d\phi}\right]^2 = \frac{2E}{kr_0} + \frac{1}{r_0^2} - \left(w - \frac{1}{r_0}\right)^2 \quad (28)$$

We now use the solution of Eq.(23) in the above:

$$(\cos^2 \phi + \sin^2 \phi) = \frac{1}{r_0^2} \left( \frac{2E}{E_0} + 1 \right) \quad (29)$$

Thus, we identify  $\epsilon$  as the eccentricity of the orbit. It is given as:

$$\epsilon = \sqrt{1 + \frac{2E}{E_0}} \quad (30)$$

Note that  $\epsilon \geq 0$ . See appendix A for more details on eccentricity and conic sections and derivation of the equations for different motion. It then follows that:

1. **Circular motion** for  $\epsilon = 0$ . Here  $E = -\frac{1}{2}E_0$ . The radius of the orbit is  $r_0$ , which is defined in Eq.(19).
2. **Elliptical motion** for  $0 < \epsilon < 1$ . Here  $-\frac{1}{2}E_0 < E < 0$ . One of foci is at the origin.
3. **Parabolic motion** for  $\epsilon = 1$ . Here  $E = 0$ . Focal length of the parabolic orbit is  $r_0/2$ . See appendix A.
4. **Hyperbolic motion** for  $\epsilon > 1$ . Here  $E > 0$ .

Thus, trajectories of a particle in an attractive  $F(r) = -k/r^2$  force field are conic sections. Generalization of Kepler's First Law of planetary motion.

## VI. KEPLER'S LAWS

1. The orbit of a planet is an ellipse with the Sun at one of the two foci. In general, it is a conic section. See Eq.(23) for the explicit form of the orbit.
2. A line segment joining a planet and the Sun sweeps out equal areas during equal intervals of time

$$\frac{dA_{\text{orbit}}}{dt} = \frac{r^2 \dot{\phi}}{2} = \frac{L}{2m} \quad (31)$$

The above can be proved by noting that  $dA_{\text{orbit}} = \frac{1}{2}r(rd\phi)$  is the area swept out by the radius vector in time  $dt$ . We also use the fact that  $L = mr^2\dot{\phi}$  is a constant of motion.

3. Axes of the ellipse  $a, b$  and area of the ellipse are given as:

$$a = \frac{r_0}{1 - \epsilon^2}, \quad b = \frac{r_0}{\sqrt{1 - \epsilon^2}}, \quad A_{\text{orbit}} = \pi ab = \frac{\pi r_0^2}{(1 - \epsilon^2)^{3/2}}. \quad (32)$$

Thus, we have:

$$T^2 = 4\pi^2 m \frac{r_0^3}{(1 - \epsilon^2)^3} \frac{mr_0}{L^2} = a^3 \frac{4\pi^2 m}{k} \quad (33)$$

This is the third law: The square of a planet's orbital period  $T$  is proportional to the cube of the length of the semi-major axis of its orbit.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Conic sections

- A conic section (or a quadratic curve) is a curve obtained from a cone's surface intersecting a plane.
- The type of curve is determined by the value of the eccentricity  $\epsilon$ .
- The equation of a conic section in polar coordinates  $(r, \phi)$ :

$$\frac{1}{r} = \frac{1}{r_0} (1 + \epsilon \cos \phi) \quad (\text{A1})$$

Here  $r_0$  is a constant.

- Note that:  $\cos \phi = \frac{x}{r}$  and  $r = r_0 - \epsilon x$ . Thus, we have:

$$x^2 + y^2 = r_0^2 + \epsilon^2 x^2 - 2r_0 x \epsilon \quad (\text{A2})$$

–  $\epsilon = 0$  is a circle:  $x^2 + y^2 = r_0^2$

–  $\epsilon = 1$  is a parabola:  $y^2 = -2r_0 x + r_0^2$

- We can rewrite Eq.(A2) as:

$$\left(x + \frac{r_0 \epsilon}{1 - \epsilon^2}\right)^2 + \frac{y^2}{1 - \epsilon^2} = \frac{r_0^2}{(1 - \epsilon^2)^2} \quad (\text{A3})$$

–  $0 < \epsilon < 1$  implies an ellipse:

$$\frac{(x + a\epsilon)^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1, \quad a = \frac{r_0}{1 - \epsilon^2}, \quad b = \frac{r_0}{\sqrt{1 - \epsilon^2}} \quad (\text{A4})$$

$a$  is the semi-major axis and  $b$  is the semi-minor axis. The centre of the ellipse is at  $(-a\epsilon, 0)$ . See Fig.(3)

–  $\epsilon > 1$  implies hyperbolas:

$$\frac{(x - a\epsilon)^2}{a^2} - \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1, \quad a = \frac{r_0}{\epsilon^2 - 1}, \quad b = \frac{r_0}{\sqrt{\epsilon^2 - 1}} \quad (\text{A5})$$

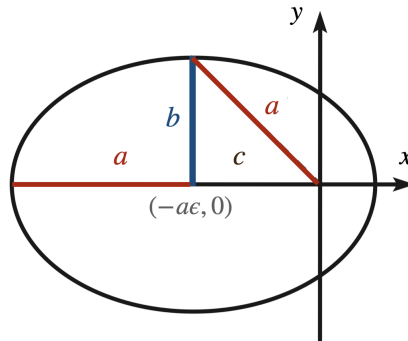


Figure 3. **An Ellipse.** One of focus is at origin. The center is at  $-a\epsilon, 0$ . In the two-body problem of the earth and the sun, the origin is where the sun is located, where the earth revolves around it an elliptical path.

## Appendix B: The Stability of Circular Orbits

- Consider a general potential:

$$V = -\frac{k}{r^n}, \quad n \geq 1 \quad (\text{B1})$$

- When do circular orbits exist? When are they stable?
- Existence implies  $L \neq 0$  and  $\dot{r} = 0$ . The latter means  $\ddot{r} = 0$ . This amounts to the condition (at  $r = r_0$ ):

$$V'_{\text{eff}}(r_0) = 0. \quad (\text{B2})$$

- In other words, circular orbits are fixed points of the effective potential  $V_{\text{eff}}(r)$ .
- The stability requires that fixed point is the minimum of the effective potential. Thus, the condition of stability is:

$$V''_{\text{eff}}(r_0) > 0. \quad (\text{B3})$$

- The condition of Eq.(B2) can be written in terms of the potential  $V(r)$  as:

$$V'_{\text{eff}}(r_0) = -\frac{L^2}{mr_0^3} + V'(r_0) = 0 \implies V'(r_0) = \frac{L^2}{mr_0^3}. \quad (\text{B4})$$

- The condition of Eq.(B3) can be written in terms of the potential  $V(r)$  as:

$$V''_{\text{eff}}(r_0) = \frac{3L^2}{mr_0^4} + V''(r_0) = \frac{3}{r_0} V'(r_0) + V''(r_0) > 0. \quad (\text{B5})$$

- The above condition for the potential of Eq.(B1) is:

$$\frac{3}{r_0} V'(r_0) + V''(r_0) > 0 \implies \frac{k}{r_c^{n+2}} (3n - n[n-1]) > 0 \quad (\text{B6})$$

- The condition for stable circular orbits is then  $n < 2$ .

## Appendix C: Solving the two-body Kepler problem exactly as a one-body problem

- The Lagrangian for the two-body Kepler problem is:

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2}m_1(\vec{v}_1 \cdot \vec{v}_1) + \frac{1}{2}m_2(\vec{v}_2 \cdot \vec{v}_2) - V(\vec{r}_1 - \vec{r}_2) \quad (\text{C1})$$

- Here  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  are the masses of the two bodies and  $\vec{r}_1$  and  $\vec{r}_2$  are their position vectors.
- We now introduced the centre-of-mass ( $\vec{R}$ ) and relative ( $\vec{r}$ ) coordinates, which are defined as:

$$\vec{R} = \frac{m_1\vec{r}_1 + m_2\vec{r}_2}{m_1 + m_2}, \quad \vec{r} = \vec{r}_1 - \vec{r}_2. \quad (\text{C2})$$

- Rewriting the Lagrangian in terms of the two new coordinates, we obtain:

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2}M(\dot{\vec{R}} \cdot \dot{\vec{R}}) + \frac{1}{2}\mu(\dot{\vec{r}} \cdot \dot{\vec{r}}) - V(\vec{r}), \quad \frac{1}{\mu} = \frac{1}{m_1} + \frac{1}{m_2} \quad (\text{C3})$$

- The Lagrangian is independent of  $\vec{R}$  (a cyclic coordinate). Thus,  $\vec{R}$  is constant. So  $\dot{\vec{R}}$  can be ignored by going to CM frame where CM is at rest. In this frame  $\dot{\vec{R}} = 0$ .
- To solve the earth-sun system exactly, we replace the earth's mass,  $m$ , with the reduced mass  $\mu$  and solve the effective one-body problem in the potential  $V(r)$ . This is indeed, what we done in section V.

### Appendix D: Hohmann transfer orbit

- Hohmann transfer orbit (minimum energy transfer) is the case when the initial and target orbits are both circular and co-planar.
- The maneuver is accomplished by placing the craft into an elliptical transfer orbit that is tangential to both the initial and target orbits.
- It is then useful to obtain a simplified expression for the energy for elliptic and circular orbits. First note that,

$$\epsilon = \sqrt{1 + \frac{2E}{E_0}}, \quad E_0 = \frac{k}{r_0}, \quad a = \frac{r_0}{1 - \epsilon^2}. \quad (\text{D1})$$

- For circular and elliptic orbits  $\epsilon < 0$ . Thus:

$$E = E_0 \frac{1 - \epsilon^2}{2} = -\frac{k}{2a} \quad (\text{D2})$$

- For a circular path around sun with radius  $\vec{r}_1$  is:

$$E = -\frac{k}{2r_1} = \frac{m}{2}v_1^2 - \frac{k}{r_1} \implies v_1 = \sqrt{\frac{k}{mr_1}}. \quad (\text{D3})$$

- Energy at the perihelion for the transfer ellipse:

$$E_t = -\frac{k}{r_1 + r_2} = E = \frac{m}{2}v_{t1}^2 - \frac{k}{r_1} \implies v_{t1} = \sqrt{\frac{k}{mr_1} \frac{2r_2}{r_1 + r_2}} \quad (\text{D4})$$

- To go from  $r_1 = R$  to  $r_2 = 2R$ , we have

$$\frac{v_{t1}}{v_1} = \sqrt{\frac{2r_2}{r_1 + r_2}} = \sqrt{\frac{4}{3}} \quad (\text{D5})$$

- For a circular path around sun with radius  $\vec{r}_2$  is:

$$E = -\frac{k}{2r_2} = \frac{m}{2}v_2^2 - \frac{k}{r_2} \implies v_2 = \sqrt{\frac{k}{mr_2}}. \quad (\text{D6})$$

- Thus, for the change from ellipse to a circle of radius  $r_2$  is:

$$\frac{v_2}{v_{t1}} = \sqrt{\frac{3R}{4r_2}} = \sqrt{\frac{3}{2}} \quad (\text{D7})$$

- Thus, the velocities are:

$$v_1 = \sqrt{\frac{k}{mR}}, \quad v_{t1} = \sqrt{\frac{4k}{3mR}}, \quad v_2 = \sqrt{\frac{k}{2mR}}, \quad \frac{v_2}{v_1} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2}}. \quad (\text{D8})$$